

1st Space Battalion

Home on the range

By Sharon L. Hartman

FORT CARSON, Colo. — Weapons ranges are nothing new to the Army. Soldiers, officers and enlisted alike, are required to qualify on their primary weapon bi-annually. In order to ensure Soldiers have a greater opportunity to get familiarized and more comfortable with their weapons, the 1st Space Battalion “Space Warriors,” have begun to conduct quarterly range weeks. The most recent range week carried out by the battalion was July 12-17, and a behind the scenes look at the event brought to the surface the intricacies of running a successful range.

Tactical Operation Center (TOC)

The range was more than just a battalion event in that members of the 1st Space Brigade headquarters, members of the 53rd Signal Battalion (SATCON) and battalion Reservists joined in with the Space Warriors to fire. To keep up with the large turnout of firers and multiple ranges, the 1st Space Battalion deployed a TOC to the range field. “We’ve not done that before,” said LTC Lee Gizzi, commander, 1st Space Battalion. “It was challenging because we had up to three ranges running at one time, plus we were shooting outside units, but the battalion did a great job.”

The members of the TOC, predominantly staff members of the battalion, worked day and night to ensure that the range ran smoothly. CPT Windy Waldrep, the assistant S-3 worked with the battalion S-3, MAJ Gary Prater in developing the warning order and subsequent fragmentary orders. “They put out the order based on the commander’s intent. So with him giving his intent, that’s when the staff started making preparations for the

range,” said CPT Erich Atkins, the battalion S-4. “The S-6, Captain Yu, was in charge of communications, command and signal, the S-1, Lieutenant (Brandy) Morris was in charge of personnel, as the S-4, I was in charge of supplies and logistics, the S-2, Captain (Scott) Weaver was in charge of security of the TOC and also worked with weather and operational issues.”

An additional challenge for the host battalion was getting their Soldiers who were running the ranges qualified as well. “Now you have to coordinate to move those personnel off the ranges to go qualify and send someone to go backfill, and you have all these different moving pieces that have to be taken into consideration,” added Atkins.

Gizzi supported Atkins’ comments saying, “You look at 4th Space Company who ran the zero range for the first couple of days. All their Soldiers were out there as safeties, helping score, helping coach, running the tower, running ammo for three days and then they had to go out and shoot and qualify, so nobody was exempt from range detail. HHC ran a range that was on the opposite side of the impact area, but they were also our support company, so when ammo had to be moved, you had to find Staff Sergeant Fowler, who’s our ammo NCO, and say get ammo from here to there. We needed to move food, water; that was the S-4 shop. They were out there trying to shoot and move coffee and get Kool-Aid out to the ranges and back to the mess halls and get it the next day. All that stuff happens in the TOC under the nerve center there for range week. Everybody knows what battalion TOCs do in combat; well for us it was

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A 1st Space Battalion safety displays a white paddle signaling to the tower that the firers' are ready to proceed. Photo by Ed White

a little different. It's tracking the current fight — being able to adjust as the situation changes.”

Ammunition

Obviously an important part of any weapons range is the ammunition, but working the ammunition detail requires more than just handing out rounds to firers. According to SGT Taurus Jones who was on Ammo detail, “We could have anywhere from three to seven people working ammunition. You have one who signs for it and mainly keeps track of what you have. We get the ammo from a place called the AHA (Ammunition Holding Area). It's like the central point and we fill out paperwork to get the ammo. We'll go to AHA and tell them how many firers we have and how much ammo we need. We have Soldiers who help load the ammunition into magazines based on the tables being fired.”

Once the magazines are loaded, the ammunition detail keeps track of the magazines going out to the firers and coming back in and also keep track of the number of firers out on the range. One of the most important pieces of working the ammo detail is keeping track of the ammunition distributed and fired. “We keep track of the number of rounds they fired and didn't fire and then use up whatever is leftover to give the Soldiers more practice,” added Jones.

Safety

Safety is a critical piece of any range. Each range has a safety detail headed by the range safety officer. These personnel are responsible for ensuring the well-being of all personnel on the range. Without this precaution, serious injury or even death can occur.

“Part of our job as safeties is to make sure these guys keep their weapons down in a safe position in the low ready. When they finish shooting we make sure they put the weapons on safe, drop their magazines and clear any rounds from the chamber that may be left in there. We just watch for overall unsafe acts. If we get an unsafe act, we'll signal the tower with a red paddle and they'll call a cease fire and stop the range from firing,” said SSG Michael Hardin, a safety on the 9mm range.

Tower Control

The range “Tower” may sound menacing, and rightfully so. The voice in each range tower controls the flow of the entire range. No one fires unless the voice in the tower tells them they can. Pretty much nothing happens without a go-ahead from the voice. The person behind the voice at this 9mm range was 1SG John Bruce, the range NCOIC, but prior to the range going hot, Bruce had a few other details to take care of with other members of the range detail. The detail had to arrive at the range approximately two hours prior to the firers to get the range ready. “When we first got here we had to set up the tables and flick the switches to pop up the targets,” said SGT Paul Lizer, a member of the 9mm range detail. “The first sergeant then went out to each lane and punched the targets to see if they would fall down. The ones that didn't work properly were annotated and five or six targets needed to be fixed. Range control came out and fixed them because the range was degrading with the weather we've had over the course of the past few days,” added Lizer. “We went from all ten lanes working to six last night which was not good because we can't run as many people with fewer lanes so it takes longer.” After the lanes and targets were inspected, a safety briefing was given and then the tower called in a cold time to

Tip of the Sphere



Clockwise from top: SGT Paul Lizer, a 1st Space Battalion, Army Space Support Team member, enters data into a program he developed to track the statistics of the range. The program tracks the performance of each firer and tracks the used and unused ammunition.

Members of the 1st Space Battalion man the ammunition point during a recent range put on by the 1st Space Battalion "Space Warriors."

CPT Erich Atkins, 1st Space Battalion S-4, right, briefs Battalion Commander, LTC Lee Gizzi in the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) set up for the range. This is the first time the battalion has deployed a TOC in support of a range.

Photos by Ed White



range control and waited for a go before putting up the red flag and calling in a hot status.

Lizer also had the responsibility of keeping track of the firers on the range, the amount of ammunition being expended and the scores of each firer. On his own initiative, Lizer developed an Excel program that made this process flow in a much easier fashion.

“The last range they had they were trying to figure out a way to track everything and they figured something electronic would be really cool, so on Monday, I sat down and made this program,” Lizer said.

“I got the name of everyone who came out on the range, the detail of what unit they’re with, like the battalion or the brigade and the 53rd. As they come on, we put them in the firing order and it adds them up.” Lizer entered whether they were firing on pop-up or paper targets and that changed the way the scoring system worked. “Say we enter the score and they get 23, it’ll show what that shows up as, and if it’s paper, it’s a different scoring system.”

There were two Soldiers out on each lane, the firer and the coach. The coach was actually taking the score down then would run the sheets up to the tower where everything would be entered into the program and tallied. The program also kept track of how many rounds each firer took out on their lanes and added up how many rounds were fired. It then subtracted the amount fired from the total amount of ammunition they had, so it showed how many rounds they had remaining.

“It kept track of all the Soldiers on the range according to the brigade and battalion, how many fired, how many were marksmen, sharpshooter or expert, and ones that got a ‘no go.’ It breaks down how many got a ‘go’ or a ‘no go’ per company and brigade or battalion. They same goes with NBC night fire. It shows a pie chart and the total for the week. It just makes it visually easy and is an attractive way to view this,” added Lizer.

The tower also had to perform hourly checks with range control to ensure they had communications, “because if we lose comms we have to shut down the range,” concluded Lizer.

Kudos

With other units participating in the range hosted by the 1st Space Battalion, the exercise could have been a lot more complicated, but the planning and execution by the battalion brought about a successful conclusion. They did a lot of things out there that week. They trained reservists and counterparts; they spent the week in about 90 degrees plus temperature just about every day. Those out on the night fire M16 range had some rain and lightning, but they stayed out there and supported and trained.

“This was an excellent range. I really appreciate the way 1st Space Battalion coordinated it,” said SSG Robert Lewis. “It was smooth. Not a lot of hiccups and not a lot of wasted time. We thought the weather was going to be a factor, but it really wasn’t. It’s warm out here. Obviously the wind is blowing but it was a very well coordinated, well run range. We’re very pleased with it. Everybody has nothing but good things to say about how the range went.

Why We Do It

The minimum in order to get individuals qualified is according to STRAC standards, but the 1st Space Battalion has upped their standards. “We have ranges quarterly so the perishable skills that come with Soldiers and their weapons are not forgotten so readily,” said 1st Space Battalion CSM Kevin McGovern. “We also incorporate a lot more familiarization fires, stress fires, reflective fires as well as close quarters marksmanship. Then we bring them out to zero and they go ahead and do the qualification, so you’re not going into it cold ... we try to do it quarterly and give them several hundred rounds through the other associated tables and firings that they would see in a combat situation.”

Added Gizzi, “We shoot four times a year because marksmanship is that important to me. It’s going to make a difference when you go down range. If you can’t hit what you’re shooting at, they’ll hit you. That’s the mentality we put into this. We go out and we qualify in the first and third quarters of the year. That’s the program we’re setting up. The second and fourth quarters, we’re going to do advanced rifle marksmanship. We’re going to do reflexive fires, we’re going to continue to work on entering a building, clear a room, the convoy operations ... the skills that they need when they go down range, because everybody leaves here. That’s the thing. It’d be one thing if you were in one infantry battalion moving to another infantry battalion. Here, you’re in a Space battalion. You’re going to leave here because most of these folks as a battalion will not deploy to combat. Teams will, but as a battalion they probably won’t, but when they leave here and find themselves back in a provisional or brigade size unit and that unit going to war, if I haven’t trained them before they go, I’ve put them at risk. We’re not willing to assume that kind of risk. As leaders you cannot afford that.”

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